

Turning “Barriers to Learning” into Opportunities for Student Engagement and Learning

Leah M. Nellis, Ph.D., NCSP

Indiana State University

lnellis@indstate.edu



Presentation Outline

- What are “Barriers to Learning” ?
- How do so-called “barriers” impact learning, engagement, and motivation?
- How can such “barriers” be re-framed as opportunities for enhancing student engagement and learning?



“Barrier”

is defined as

- a) something material that blocks or is intended to block passage;**
- b) a natural formation or structure that prevents or hinders movement or action.**

What do you think
of when you hear
“barriers to learning and teaching”?



What Are the “Barriers”?

Academic Factors

- Curriculum and instructional methods
- Class size, structure, and management
- Early learning and readiness skills
- School environment
- Multiple school changes

Non-Academic Factors

- Environmental
 - Poor nutrition
 - Family stress and conflict
 - Peer conflict (e.g, bullying)
 - Abuse and neglect
 - Homelessness
- Personal
 - Mental health
 - Behavioral difficulties
 - Attentional difficulties
 - Social difficulties
 - Crisis and Trauma

A Paradox

- Over the years, awareness of the many external and internal factors that are barriers to learning and teaching has given rise to legal mandates and a variety of psychological, counseling, and social support programs, as well as to initiatives for school-community collaborations (Adelman and Taylor, 2006).
 - NCLB, IDEA 2004, Indiana Senate Bill 529 IC 12-13-16
- Yet, pressures related to achieving satisfactory Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) have led many schools to increase focus on reducing THE academic barriers to learning AT THE EXPENSE of programs that focus on non-academic barriers to learning (Weist).

How do “barriers to learning”
impact student engagement,
motivation, and learning?



The Connection is Well Documented

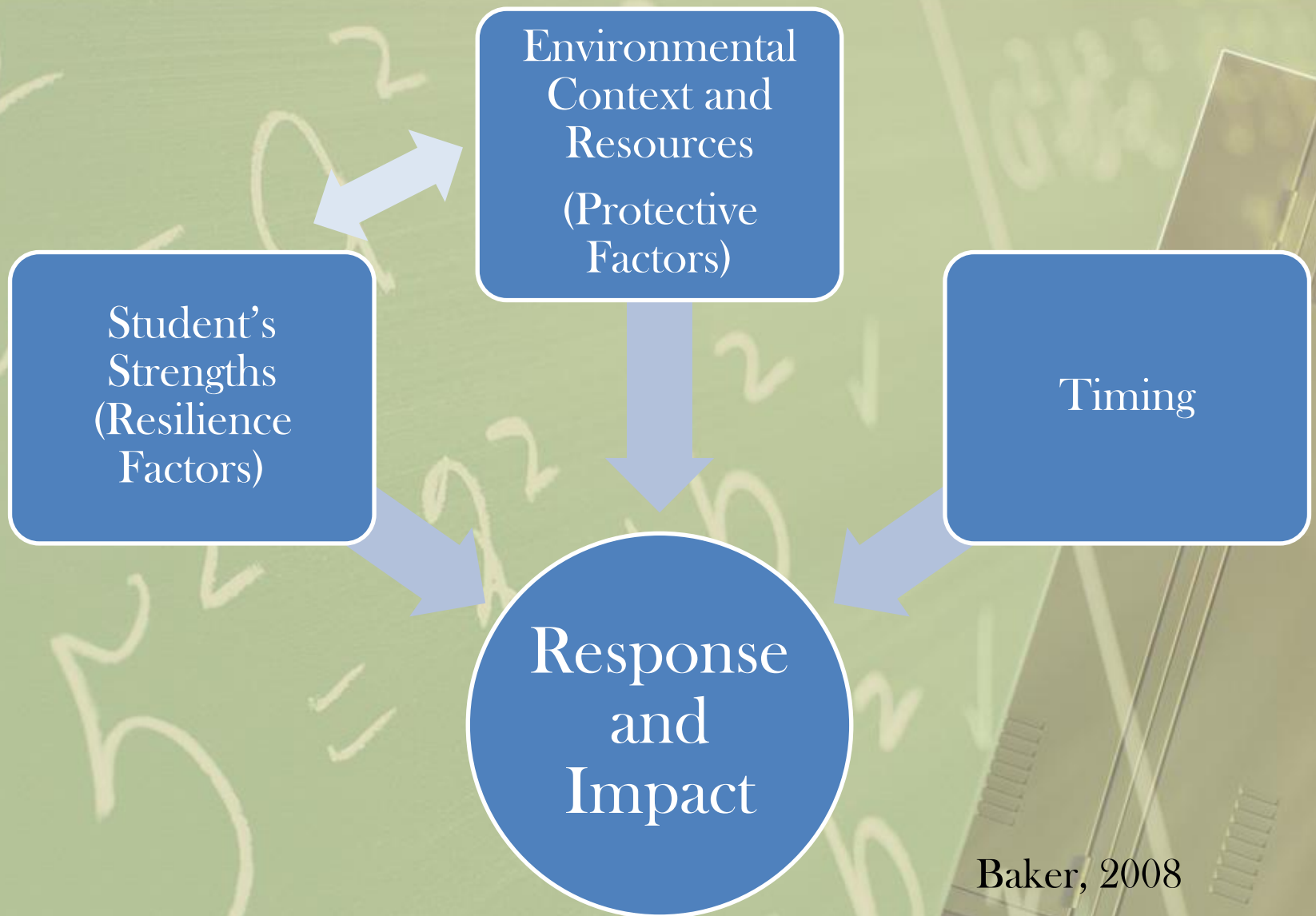
- Positive and sustained school climate promotes students' academic achievement and healthy development (Zins, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005);
- Social and psychological wellness is integral to academic success (Doll & Cummings, 2008);
- Post-school and adult, vocational success is dependent on more than academic skills; effective listening, self-discipline, conflict resolution, and ethical decision making are essential.

National Initiatives

- ASCD's Whole Child Initiative,
<http://www.wholechildeducation.org/>
- Proposed national legislation
- Service learning and civic participation initiatives
- School mental health initiatives



The Impact is Individualized



Baker, 2008

Looking Deeper at the Influencing Variables

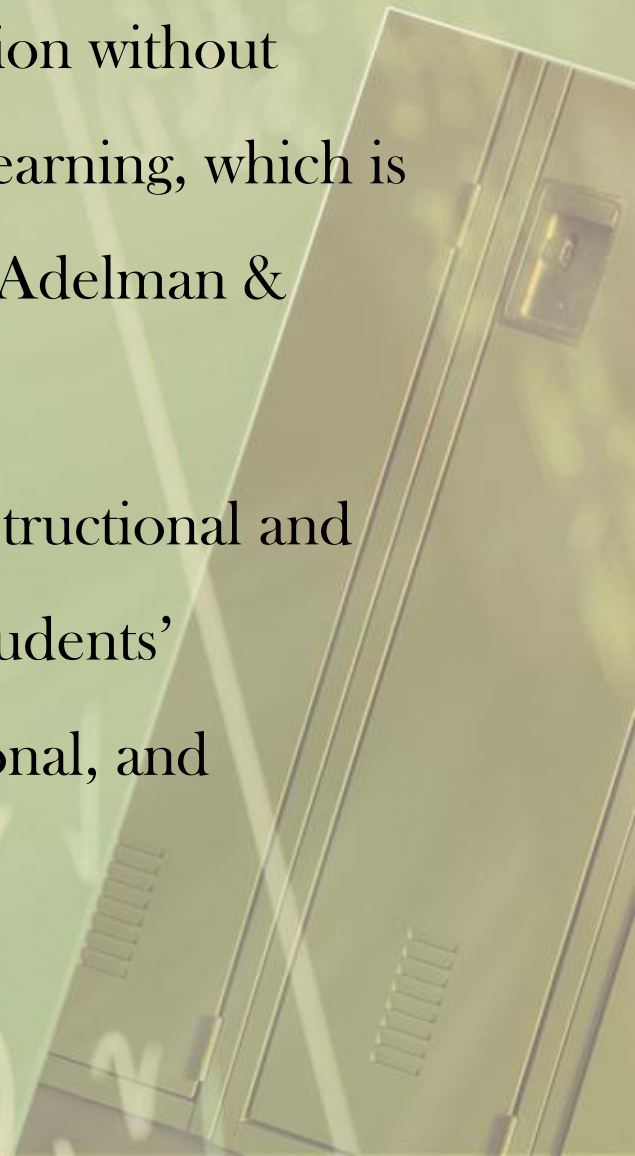
Resilience Factors

- Responsibility
- Decision Making
- Citizenship
- Cooperation
- Leadership Skills
- Self-management
- Self-esteem and confidence

Protective Factors

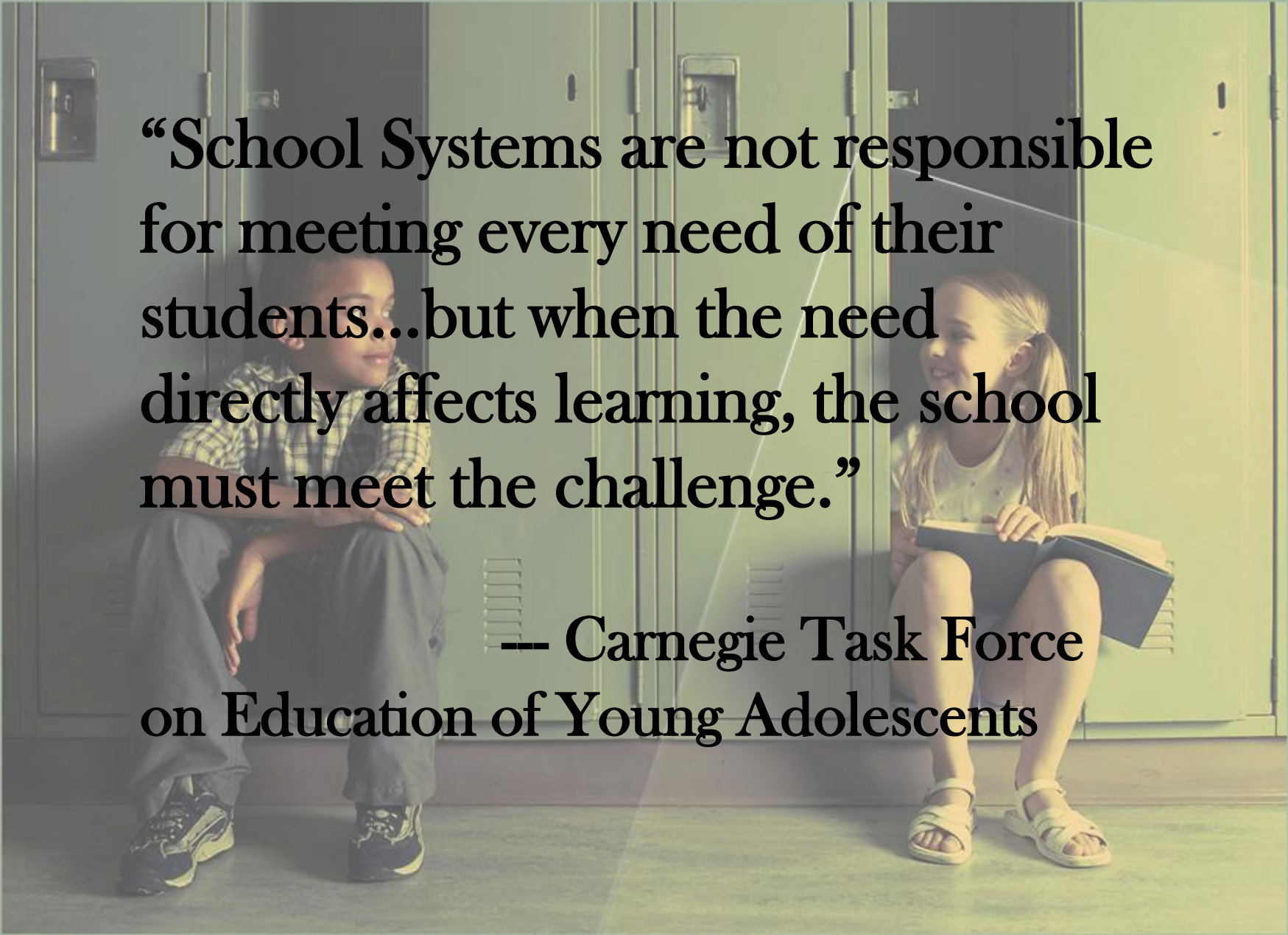
- Caring relationships with teachers and other adults
- Family support
- Family engagement with schooling
- Safe neighborhoods
- High expectations in community
- School environments of warmth, engagement, instructional excellence, academic rigor

- Schools cannot provide high-quality instruction without attending to their student's participation in learning, which is influenced by so-called barriers to learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2006)
- Schools' attempts and efforts to promote instructional and academic success are constrained by their students' developmental competencies (social, emotional, and behavioral skills) (Doll & Cummings, 2008);



As Educators,
what can we do?,
what should we do?
what must we do?





“School Systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students...but when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.”

**— Carnegie Task Force
on Education of Young Adolescents**

Responding to the Needs

- Decrease risk factors **AND** increase protective and resilience factors,
- By teaching and ensuring the learning of explicit skills,
- As part of systemic approaches for prevention and intervention.



Six Essential Components of Indiana's RTI

- Leadership
- Evidence-based core curriculum, instruction, & interventions/extensions
- Assessment and progress monitoring system
- Data-based decision making
- Cultural responsiveness
- Family, community & school partnerships



Integrated System for Academic and Behavioral Supports

Tier 3:

- Few Students
- Increased Frequency
- Longer Duration

Intense,
Individualized
Support

***Services across tiers are
fluid and data-driven***

District/Community Team
Building Core Team

Tier 2:

- Small Group

Targeted, Supplemental
Supports

Building Core Team

Tier 1:

- All Students
- Preventative,
Proactive

Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Learning
Environment

Grade Level Teams
Building Core Team
School Improvement Team

Applications of a Systems Approach

- School-wide Discipline Models
 - Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), www.pbis.org
 - Caring School Community programs, www.devstu.org
- School-based Mental Health Services
 - UCLA School Mental Health project, <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>
 - Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), <http://www.casel.org/>



- Service Learning and Civic Participation

- First Amendment Schools,

- www.firstamendmentschools.org

- Center for Information and Research on Civic

- Learning and Engagement, <http://www.civicyouth.org/>

Getting Started with Climate Assessments

- How?
 - Focus groups, observations, interviews, town hall discussions, study circles, participatory action research, and surveys.
- Emphasis on:
 - Student, parent, school personnel input regarding
 - All the dimensions related to the process of teaching and learning.
 - Safety, relationships, teaching & learning, and institutional environment (Cohen et al, 2008).
 - Center for Social and Emotional Education's (CSEE) Comprehensive School Climate Inventory,
www.csee.net/climate/csciassessment.

Addressing the Identified Needs

- Using a continuum of supports and interventions
- Using evidence-based interventions
 - Bullying Programs
 - Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>
 - CyberSmart! Cyberbullying Awareness Curriculum, <http://cybersmartcurriculum.org/cyberbullying/NASP/>
 - Suicide Prevention Programs
 - Resourceful Adolescent Program, www.hlth.qut.edu.au/psyc/rap
 - Social-emotional Learning
 - Strong Kids program, <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/>
- Evaluating the Impact and Future Needs

References

- Adelman, H., & Taylor, L. (2006). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Baker, J. A. (2008). Assessing school risk and protective factors. In B. Doll & J. Cummings (Eds.), *Transforming school mental health services: Population-based approaches to promoting the competency and wellness of children*. (pp. 43-65). MD: NASP.
- Cohen, J., Pickeral, T., & McCloskey, M. (2008). The challenge of assessing school climate. *Educational Leadership*, 66(4). Available at www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership.

References

Doll, B. & Cummings, J. (2008). Why population-based services are essential for school mental health. In B. Doll & J. Cummings (Eds.), *Transforming school mental health services: Population-based approaches to promoting the competency and wellness of children*. (pp. 1-19). MD: NASP.

Zins, J., Weissber, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. (2004). *Building school success on social emotional learning: What does the research say?*. NY: Teachers College Press.